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Hip-Hop's Influence on Stripper Culture: The Era of Cardi B's

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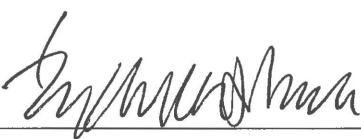
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"No man wants to accept they could be getting used for money. But it's OK for them to let us know that they use us?"- Cardi B

Hip-Hop's Influence on Stripper Culture: The Era of Cardi B's

Twenty years ago the term stripper or exotic dancer would have made heads turn. However, today feminist politics traditional negative stigma on strip culture is being challenged by the presence of the hip-hop industry within the strip club space. With the emergence of former stripper Cardi B as well as discussions in American politics around former porn star Stormy Daniels it's clear that the way society thinks and interacts with strip culture is evolving away from the stereotypical negative one.

Stripper Origins

An exotic dancer, or stripper as it commonly known is a type of adult entertainer whose occupation involves striptease in a public venue such as a strip club. Up until the 1970s, strippers in Western cultures were almost exclusively female, performing for male audiences. (Roach 37) Since then male strippers have become more common; however, this paper will only focus on female strippers and heterosexual/male clientele. I chose to focus on female dancers because "historically male dancers have not faced the same blatant negative societal stigmas that female dancers have." (Edgan 23)

Modern Americanized strip clubs have minimized intimate interaction between strippers and customers, reducing the importance of the 'teasing' aspect of the performance in favor of speed to undress or strip. Many scholars debate as to why this is but collectively the dominate theory is that people have become desensitized to teasing therefore, attention spans are low so it's important to accelerate seduction in order to

make a profit. Not every stripper will end their performance completely nude, though most full nudity is common in areas where it's not prohibited by law. In addition, to removing ones clothes, the integration of the dance pole as a nearly ubiquitous prop has shifted the emphasis of the performance to a more acrobatic, explicit expression, compared to the slow-developing burlesque style. (Edgan 7)

In the United States, most strippers work in strip clubs; however, they also cover private events such as bachelor parties. Today, strippers have also ventured into more exclusive roles these are referred to as "featured dancers" which tend to have their own celebrity (Price 54). By "featured dancers" I'm referring to strippers who gain fame amongst celebrities, these women are not necessarily the most talented dancers but they do tend to earn the most money, compared to other dancers in the club based on favoritism by the biggest clients. The physical attributes and sex appeal of a dancer determine the amount of business she tends to generate. Part of what makes strippers so popular is how accessible they are. There are no job prerequisites and formal training is minimal, primarily skills are learned on the job and provided by more senior dancers. Dancers learn a set of rules, such as never leave money unattended, never leave the club with a customer, and never refuse a table dance. As long as she can "sell" herself, she is capable of becoming an exotic dancer (Price 14).

Why Strip?

Emotional labor and sex work have been at the forefront of women's studies. Sociologist Arlie Hochschild defines emotional labor as refers to the process by which workers are expected to manage their feelings in accordance with organizationally defined rules and guidelines.

These jobs range from doctors and nurses to jobs within sex work such as porn stars or actors that engage in sexually explicit behavior while being filmed. While men do use their bodies for work, by virtue of being subject to the system of patriarchy, there are more job opportunities that involve females exploiting their own sexuality and it being acceptable to treat women as objects. Whether it's a part of the job ¹description or not is another story. This means that women are subject to a variety of circumstances in which people in power such as coworkers, bosses, managers, and other leadership figures, abuse their power by exploiting these women. For instance, a 2017 article by CNN reported on a human trafficking survivor, that had been raped up 43,200 times over a four-year period she said her sexual abuse began at age 5 by a 'trusted' relative and was able to carry on so long because of a neglectful mother and dysfunctional family. There are plenty of differences between human trafficking and exotic dancing but these two complex sex labors fall under forms of sex work and therefore have the same stigmas attached to them.

Thus far the overwhelming notion in academia is that the public display of the female body makes her subordinate to the male gaze and that by choosing to use her body for profit she contributes to her own oppression. Countless scholars have written on this topic. Discussions and authors used by Patricia Hill Collins are widely encompassed in her book, *Black Feminist Thought*. In her chapter *The Suppression of black feminist thought* Collins says that there "three interdependent dimensions of oppression that black women have dealt with. First, the "exploitation of black women's labor essential to U.S capitalism" which symbolizes black women's "long standing ghettoization in service

¹ Burlesque def. combines dance and acrobatics centered on a vertical pole. This performance takes place in both gentleman's clubs as erotic dance but recently it has also gained popularity as a mainstream form of fitness

occupations” represents the economic dimension of oppression. (Collins 4) She goes on to discuss black women’s means of survival which she calls an “all-consuming activity” for black women. Few intellectual opportunities are given to black women which to a certain extent has led to “millions of impoverished black women ghettoized in many U.S inner cities demonstrate the continuation of these earlier forms of black women’s economic exploitation.” (Collins 4-5) Secondly “the political dimensions of oppression have denied black women the rights and privileges routinely extended to White male citizens.” For example, Black women were prohibited from participating in a number of political rights such as voting, exclusion from public office and many other limitations further substantiate the political subordination of black women. Finally, the reproduction of controlling images applied to Black women that originated during the slave era “attest to the ideological dimensions of U.S. Black women’s oppression.” Ideology refers to the body of ideas reflecting the interest of a group of people. Within the U.S culture, racist and sexist ideologies permeate the social structure to such a degree that they become hegemonic namely seen as natural, normal and inevitable. (Collins 5-6) In this context, certain assumed qualities attached to Black women are used to justify oppression; from ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers these are negative stereotypes applied to Black women’s oppression.

Female exotic dancers who perform to "misogynistic" hip-hop music and participate in the promotion of strip clubs complicate the discussion on whether or not sexual labor is positive for women. It is possible that their behavior can be discussed in ways that encourage liberation of the black female body. On the otherhand feminist theory documents the historical and ongoing abuse of black bodies by mainstream

institutions, beginning with slavery and in the present day with the media [news outlets, film, advertisements] and corporations. They are hardly ever in favor of liberating black bodies for that would mean an end to the neoliberal economy. Black strippers fall under one of the simplistic stereotypical roles that benefit the White man's dominance. Collins uses a quote by Trudier Harris to begin chapter four, "Mammies, Matriarchs and Other Controlling Images". The quote precisely explains images of the stereotypical black woman,

"Called Matriarch, Emasculator, and Hot Mamma. Sometimes Sister, Pretty Baby, Auntie, Mammy and Girl. Called Unwed Mother, Welfare Recipient, and Inner City Consumer. The Black American Woman has had to admit that while nobody knows the trouble she saw, everybody, his brother, and his dog, felt qualified to explain her, even to herself, (Collins 68).

Historically ideological oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality could not continue without "powerful ideological justifications for their existence." The choice to portray black women as the stereotypical representations helps further justify "U.S black women's oppression" and challenging these images and notions has been a core theme in Black feminist thought. Due to "generalized ideology of domination" stereotypical images of Black womanhood take on special meaning. Because the authority to define societal values is a major instrument of power elite groups in exercising power often times manipulate ideas about black womanhood. (Collins 68)

Even though black feminist theorists have more than good intentions by documenting the struggles of black women, the analysis can at times be overwhelming negative and evoke the same feelings as the people and institutions that not only feel qualified to explain her, but have power to determine her fate as well by withholding

information. It is important that women come away from readings NOT feeling like the decision to use her body for profit means that she has neglected her wellbeing. On the contrary women should come away feeling like they have learned about their complicated relationship with society and with a better understanding of how to positively engage with their sexuality and make informed decisions about how they want to use it. When Collins first wrote *Black Feminist Thought* there were no Cardi B's or Blac Cyna's therefore she and other theorist weren't exposed to the possibilities of someone such as Cardi B and frankly her success probably would've been expected by few.

The Era of Cardi B

Belcalis Almanzar, or Cardi B as she is widely known is a former stripper turned rapper from the Bronx, NY. She began stripping at 19 after being fired from her previous job. Through stripping she was able to gain financial independence-enough so that she moved out of her abusive boyfriend's place. "There was two pit bulls in that house, and I had asthma. There was bedbugs, too," While working as a stripper Cardi B began her ascent into Internet fame. While working as a stripper in Manhattan she became a Vine and Instagram celebrity for four years, delivering bold raunchy one-liners in hilarious 6-second clips. "You know I get a lot of questions, you know are you a model or a comedian or something and I'm like no...I'm a stripper hoe!" (GQ Magazine) this works Although social media created a fan base for Cardi B it also led to her entering the reality show VH1's *Love and Hip Hop: New York*. Despite only being on the show for two seasons she was known for having an infamous feud's with a costar's girlfriend. Her famous one liner from the show "a girl have beef with me, she gonna have beef with me forever" went viral, inspiring the song off her debut mixtape, "Foreva." Part of Cardi B's

success is the blatant masculine voice she uses in her music. In one of her infamous songs “Stripper Hoe” she refers to men as “dogs” whom she controls with her sexuality and wit she also calls out other women who allow men to take advantage of them. She takes it a step further by encouraging women to use men to their own advantage.

Got 'em sending gifts, it's not even my birthday
You niggas soft and I meant that in the worst way
Oh you bitches suckin' dick just to get a bag
You hustlin'-backwards ass bitch, you're doin' bad
It's pretty sad, you should be getting more than that
Suck a dick so you can pay your rent, couple months with that
I mention flow, keep it on the low, I tell you facts
When a nigga 'bout to cum, just throw it back
It's over, you won, that nigga trapped
And that bank account, girl? Empty that

One could easily read these lyrics and think Cardi B is anti-feminist and advocating for women to become gold diggers. I believe she is saying that men naturally have power over women in virtually everything however when it comes to how we use our bodies and our intelligence against conservative society and misogynistic men, women can accomplish wonders. Cardi B's background as a stripper allowed her to flourish into this confident, sexually conscious woman. Today more than ever we seem to be living in an era of Cardi B's and by that I mean social media in particular has allowed women similar to Cardi B to have a platform to share their personalities and talents with the world. There are several former strippers that gained fame pre-Cardi era: Blac Chyna, Amber Rose, Trina, and many others were able to become artists, entertainers as well as feminist activist. Now with the success of Cardi B many more women will try to follow in her footsteps. In April of this year she released her debut album “Invasion of Privacy” that features thirteen tracks including her two hit singles Bodak Yellow and Bartier Cardi ft. 21 Savage. The album received widespread praise from music critics and fans and

quickly became certified gold by the “Recording Industry Association of America”. It’s clear that Cardi B is here to stay and that her ability to change her economic status and lifestyle was all do to her ability to combine her stripper past with her hidden talents as a rapper.

Despite how new Cardi B’s career is she has a very loyal fan base and her level of success in such a short period of time is definitely worth studying. Part of what attracts fans to Cardi B is her unpolished genuine nature. Even though these women can’t control the system itself they can control their own situation. She’s proven that although misogyny still exists the system can work for women if they know how to use it and are given opportunity. Earlier I mentioned that Patricia Collins said that ‘women who use their bodies for profit contributing to their own oppression.’ When this was written this statement was probably overwhelmingly true in that society had never been exposed to let alone embraced someone like Cardi B. She is an anomaly to second-wave feminist because she identifies as a feminist yet she challenges conventional notions of femininity. Not only due her past as a former a stripper but also the manner in which she discusses her past is done without shame and the public seems to be embracing her without the same prejudice it once would’ve had. Hip-Hop hasn’t completely changed the meaning of being a stripper but there’s no denying that Cardi B’s success has changed and or lessened the negative notions affiliated with strippers and the strip club space.

The Feminist Stripper

Strippers perform striptease for a number of reasons predominantly to make money however some women become comfortable with their physicality’s through the amount of time they spend naked as well as the fact that they’re able to see and interact

with other naked women. (Dudash 97) This idea of “selling” yourself based on physical attributes is precisely how the feminist stripper was born. By feminist stripper I’m referring to women who strip because they want to strip. These are women who don’t conform to the stereotypes associated with exotic dancers instead they find stripping to be an empowering experience of sexual expression. Feminist strippers perform almost identically to your typical exotic dancer but they have more autonomy over their pay and their clients. The autonomy used by feminist strippers is seen through their ability to choose who they perform for, when they will perform, and for how long it will last. They also choose which type of performances they will perform. (Roach 9) Similar to regular exotic dancer’s feminist strippers deal with their share of hardships as well. Being a stripper subjects these women to judgment from society. By working in this industry they are also subject to surveillance, arrest, detention, forced venereal disease testing, extortion, violence and rejection from family and friends. Strippers also face the hardship of defending their work as legitimate work and defending their justification of using their bodies for money. Regulating Black women’s sexuality also constitutes a part of “gender oppression” in that sexuality is divided into two categories-the asexual moral woman to be protected by marriage and their sexual, immoral counterparts-served as a gender template for constructing ideas about masculinity and femininity” Thus in mainstream Western thought there are interwoven binaries with approved sexual expressions at the top and forbidden sexualities at the bottom. (Collins 135) The virgin/whore dichotomy has been perpetuated and thrust into the face of all everyday women who strip. Whether or not a woman really is an actual virgin or not is of lesser concern than whether she can socially construct herself as the ‘good’ girl. One of the

issues Black women face is automatically being racialized as 'bad' girls regardless of actual behavior. For a Black woman to willingly work as an exotic dancer she is either portrayed as a thief, a home wrecker, unintelligent or she is a mother doing what needs to be done to put food on the table for her child. These representations fail to acknowledge the racialized stereotypes working against women of color and they fail to represent the women who truly do take pleasure in their job and choose to do it.

Where Hip Hop and Strip Culture Intersect

Feminist strippers are ever present in the complex and overtly sexualized world of American Hip-Hop. "Hip Hop has been defined by many as a way of life that encompasses everything from dress to speech." (Pough 233) Since the early 1990s entertainment media has been using the urban strip club to promote the lifestyle of hip-hop and urban pop-culture. Today American hip-hop has become mainstream and has "expanded to include genres such as film, spoken word, autobiography, literature, journalism, and activism." (Pough 233) Hip-Hop, as both a genre of music and cultural experience, should be acknowledged as the pillar upon which broader American pop culture institutions like mainstream media outlets, conglomerates in the music industry and other organizations work together to morph, then transmit particular lifestyle trends and sometimes values, as "black", "cool", "hip", and "deviant." The impressionable minds of the youth who follow these organizations for the information they distribute as well as the lives of artists and influencers in the Hip-Hop industry. In the age of social media, instant access to everything is certain. Cultural trends in hip-hop become appropriated by the masses simply by the access of music videos and popular social media platforms. Through the production of mass and social media the urban strip club has been exposed

and made into a hegemonic entity for the general American public. Both male and female rappers have songs saluting strippers, boasting about the lifestyle and the image of their ideal woman, who just so happens to be an exotic dancer. Rap artists like 2Chainz (luv dem strippas), Juicy J (Bounce It), and Nicki Minaj (Beez in the Trap) have music videos on location at high-profile urban strip clubs. There are reality television shows (Love and Hip Hop and Atlanta Strip Clubs) that actually follow the lives of some of the most successful strippers in Miami and Atlanta, cities recognized nationally for their leadership in normalizing, ‘celebrifying’ and dominating the urban exotic dance industry. YouTube videos created by media conglomerates and everyday users show the possibilities of what happens in strip clubs by providing an inside peak at the rewards of certain performances and the interaction with big-name celebrities, along with a collection of interviews with strippers who live and breathe the lifestyle. Magic City, the most infamous of all urban strip clubs is a prime example of how the average citizen can see and experience this change in access. No longer are the rich and famous inaccessible to average citizens. One can feel like they have the potential to live an extravagant lifestyle. The proximity to the lifestyle of rich and famous entertainers is heightened even more when one can go to the strip club for the birthday party of a ²famous rapper and also see the stripper who’s also featured in said rappers music video on MTV or BET. For the stripper who is not famous this new craze gives her an idea of the potential return on her investment into the lifestyle, monetary and celebrity.

Hip Hop scholar Gwendolyn D. Pough discusses the difficulties of combining hip-hop and feminism. There is no denying how difficult it is to find feminism in the lyrics of contemporary rappers. Early “rap produced rap songs with political themes of

unity, racial uplift, self definition, self determination, and black diasporic connections.” Today’s rap is deeply misogynistic; women are constantly referred as “bitches and hoes” however today women are also referring to themselves and each other by the same names. Bell hooks and Cheo Coker are two theorists that challenge this notion. Both Hooks and Coker note that “rap music does not occur in a vacuum and that sexism and misogyny are as American as apple pie” They claim that the only difference between rappers and “suits” in the boardroom is race and socioeconomic status. Although rap does reproduce some startling and indeed, ugly representations of “female objectification, rap is not responsible for other travesties, such as the feminization of poverty, welfare reform and the glass ceiling.” (Pough 238)

“If the Strippers love it, it’s a hit”- Magic City

A 2015 documentary captured what can happen one night at what GQ Magazine calls “America’s most important club.” Documentarian Lauren Greenfield’s documentary, *Inside the Atlanta Strip Club that Runs Hip-Hop* is a raw look inside *Magic City* the most infamous of all urban strip clubs in America. The film features several strippers and famous rappers offering commentary on how the club can lead to great success for both artists and strippers hoping to gain fame and make a lot of money. Rapper, Future is one of the most notable recent rappers to go mainstream with his music from his success at this infamous club. “Magic City is a strip club”, says rapper Future, “when you walk in you throw money and girls get completely butt naked, they take their tops off, their bottoms off and they shake their asses.” Beautiful women and the best new music attracts such big clientele. Senior stripper Diamond describes the hierarchy in the club when it comes to both what kind of money warrants a specific performance and who

is responsible for picking up senior dancer's money. Senior dancers refer to strippers who have been dancing at the club for at least 3-5 years. Part of what makes this club so popular amongst strippers is the clientele. Atlanta is hip-hop's most important city in the hip-hop industry therefore the club can have anyone from Young Thug, 2Chainz and Juicy J at the club on the same night. Music played in this club is heard before it plays anywhere else and it's also where it's decided if that music will play anywhere else.



Rapper Drake drops \$50,000 at Strip Club



Rapper Future & DJ Esco

Basically *Magic City* is a right of passage into mainstream hip-hop. At this club only one person decides if you'll be a star, DJ Esco. DJ Esco is not only the most famous DJ at Magic City but he is also Future's personal DJ. It's well known that if DJ Esco plays your track then you'll be a star. This fame is not just exclusive to male rappers; female rappers such as Cardi B are now competing with their male counterparts. Strippers also reap the benefits of clients that come out to show off their wealth to anyone that takes notice (usually celebrities). This place is all about persona- "you either have money or you want to project that you have it." (Magic City) For women who visit the strip club, they can see another woman's body on display as form of personal research, entertainment and pleasure. For women and girls who know of the strip club through secondary media only she thinks of her sexuality and sexual agency and how others

desire her. (Thompson 293) Sexual agency is an individual's ability to act in a way that accomplishes one's goals. (Theory Toolbox 255)

Theory: Where Academia and Popular Culture Meet

The notion of the empowered stripper has been circulating in conversation amongst women's studies scholars, and hip-hop scholars. In her book *Black Noise* Tricia Rose has a chapter entitled "Bad Sistas: Black Women Rappers and Sexual Politics in Rap Music". She says, "At the very least, black women rappers are in dialogue with dominant American culture as they struggle to define themselves against a confining and treacherous social environment," (Rose 148). But her analysis comes before the emergence of Cardi B and many other figures that could change the conclusion of her literature.

Southern rap, a subgenre that has long had songs saluting strippers, detailing strippers as the epitome of entertainment and strippers being in line with the flashy, materialistic style of hip-hop. Both frequently mention strippers in their music. She mentions the female b-boy dancers, but not the dancers who express the sensual aspects of rapper's lyrics. For reasons due to the time and changes in the Hip-hop industry, not Rose's analysis, she does not include female rappers such as Cardi B, Nicki Minaj, and pop singers like Rihanna who take on what is considered a masculine voice.

Both Minaj's and Rihanna's brands metaphorically support the manipulation of the female sexual organs usually for marketing purposes. By this I mean these artists rely upon lyrics that defy conventions regarding feminist language. Their lyrics detail stories of them wanting to take strippers home and fuck them, slapping strippers on the ass, and making it rain on a stripper's ass. Their videos are shot in strip clubs or are creative

reenactments of the strip club. Take Rihanna's "Pour it Up" this song and video are tailored for stripper's and women curious about this 'profession'. In the song Rihanna presents a version of the typical strip club environment. She highlights exactly what one is doing or should be doing while at the strip club.

Throw it up, throw it up
Watch it all fall out
Pour it up, pour it up
That's how we ball out
Throw it up, throw it up
Watch it all fall out
Pour it up, pour it up
That's how we ball out
Strip clubs and dollar bills
I still got my money
Patron shots can I get a refill?
I still got my money
Strippers goin' up and down that pole
And I still got my money
Four o'clock and we ain't going home
Cause I still got my money

The strip club is a place of fantasy but more importantly it's a place where women have the power to dominate men in regard to their sexual agency by taking control of their body's natural sexual power through the seduction of dance. This video highlights three crucial aspects to stripper culture: Alcohol (Pour it up, Pour it up), Money ("throw it up, throw it up"), and Strippers ("goin up and down that pole"). What's interesting about this video is how gender is represented. There are no men in this video and it's clear that this was purposely done in order to make sure the power of the gaze relied upon the women. Rihanna sits as both a spectator and performer in a chair resembling a throne for a majority of video. The absence of men plays a crucial role in Rihanna's use of the masculine voice. She wants to take the power away from the stereotypical male rappers

by completely eliminating their presence to allow featured dancers to control their own agency. By moving these women to front of the video she removes the stigma of exploitation because the only gazes in the video are from Rihanna and other dancers.

Nicki Minaj is another example of a female artist that uses masculine lyrics. Throughout her career Minaj has constantly referred to men and women as her “Sons” basically alluding to the fact that she’s the leader of them. Part of this leader role comes from Minaj’s rapper persona up until Cardi B she was the mainstream female rapper breaking records. In her hit single “Beez in the Trap ft. 2Chainz” Minaj discusses how her father allowed her to go from the bottom to the top. “beez in the trap” stands for two things first it is an old phrase meaning “I’ve got what I need, and then I’m on top” and secondly it is a Southern slang for “I’m always” A “trap” refers to a Southern slang term, is essentially a crack den or a seedy place where a dealer sells drugs.

Bitches ain't shit and they ain't saying nothing
A hundred mothafuckas can't tell me nothing
I beez in the trap, be-beez in the trap
I beez in the trap, be-beez in the trap
Bitches ain't shit and they ain't saying nothin'
A hundred mothafuckas can't tell me nothin'
I beez in the trap, be-beez in the trap
I beez in the trap, be-beez in the trap
Man, I been did that, man, I been popped off
And if she ain't trying to give it up she get dropped off
Let me bust that U-ie, bitch bust that open
Might spend a couple thou just to bust that open
Rip it off no joking,
Like your name Hulk Hogan
Niggas move weight in the South but live in Hoboken
Bitch, I spit that crack, like I'm in that trap
So if you need a hit then I'm with that bat
Similar to Rihanna Minaj’s video takes place in a space identical to the strip club.

Minaj is surrounded by ‘featured’ strippers Jessica Dime and Miami Tip both are former dancers that are well known from popular urban strip clubs and they also can be seen on

VH1's Love and Hip Hop (for cities Atlanta and Miami). The biggest difference between the "Pour it Up" Video and "Beez in the Trap" is the presence of men. Throughout the video male rappers: 2Chainz, Baby and Safaree are seen counting money. The choice to include men in this video is interesting because although men are present they don't exactly interact with the strippers. They are never seen simply watching strippers dance and nor are they ever seen touching these dancers. The male presence seems to reflect more how celebrity men really act at the strip club. It seems to be a competition of spectacle. Each rapper has more money than the next and they're all eager to show it off including Minaj herself.

Going to the Club

In order to ensure that my research is as reflective of the real world as possible, I drew on several sources: observations at a Washington, D.C strip club that advertises itself as "Hip Hop" strip clubs I also visited strips clubs in Chicago, IL. These clubs are located just in or just outside the city limits. Stadium Gentlemen's Club and Steakhouse in Washington, D.C. The location is tucked away among concrete buildings with rusted metal fixtures, hardly any windows and docks for trucks. An obviously renovated establishment, with brightly colored signs, people and cars moving about stands in stark contrast to the drab grey, eerily desolate old buildings that surround it. The street that the club is on is short, between two main thoroughfares. The pavement is cracked in some places and light grey indicating that it hasn't been repaved in a while. We all dip up and down as the car goes over bumps. A black banner takes up the entire side of the club that is on the street. In

large pink slender typeface, Stadium is printed on the banner. Also on the banner is a neon pink outline of a woman.



We got into the club at about 7pm, clusters of people were scattered around. The decor was black so that blue, pink and green lights illuminated the walls and around the bar. The padded seats were long benches and went around the entire perimeter of the club. We took our seats (I was surprised we could sit because at other clubs one must pay more for seats) on the opposite side of the entrance, on the left of the VIP, and directly in front of the farthest dance pole out of the two main dance poles that were on either side of the bar. VIP stands for very important person. One pays more for being VIP and with the title comes preferential treatment. The services that come with being VIP vary but include valet parking, having a place to sit, sitting front row, being waited on, and meals or drinks included. At the very least VIP almost always means being allowed to enter a venue without waiting in line and

being separated from the rest of the club. In the context of Stadium on a Wednesday VIP is cordoned off with thick velvety black ropes, a bouncer standing between the general section and the VIP, making sure that people do not pass the rope. VIP really translates to celebrity or person with a lot of money. Typically, I've found at any club that I go to whether it's a strip club or not it's obvious by the number of bottles on the table or the clothes people have on that VIP's are exclusive and they're not bothered with non VIP's. The seats in VIP are not long benches but individual chairs. There were three dance poles on the wall opposite the bar.

Groups of opposite sexes that came together, stayed together and talked with one another. Some people were seated and others were standing around talking with one another and drinking. There was not much dancing going on but this changed later in the night. There was something different in the way I saw women and men interact at the strip club versus how I have seen women and men interact at a regular social club.

Women at "Stadium" were not shaking their butts or glancing around to see who was looking, trying to get noticed. They did not stand around looking as if they were waiting for men to approach them. Men were not standing around watching women and waiting for women to dance with them so that they could then approach them and try to dance with them. My theory is that there is no pressure to perform the act of choosing the opposite sex or performing for the opposite sex because the dancers are there. My theory is that the relaxed atmosphere of strip clubs verses regular clubs takes the pressure off each gender to perform. One goes to the strip club to be entertained and to show off while the regular strip club is for people who

want to entertain themselves. There were about seven strippers standing and sitting together directly off of the stage behind the poles that were on either side of the bar. Their mannerisms struck me as casual because I thought of strippers as performers and thus they would follow the protocols of the proscenium stage. Once the dancer is on stage they are transformed into a persona and must stay in character at all times. The audience does not see the preparations the dancer has gone through. Even when a dancer is not performing if the audience can see them, the performer is still and does not display pedestrian movements like resting a hand on one hip while standing, or laughing.

I could see the dancers talking to one another, fixing their hair in the mirror and adjusting the strings of their costumes. All of the dancers appeared to be black, but came in a range of shades. They looked to weigh about 125-175 pounds. There was one who stood out that had a darker skin complexion, she was also thinner and climbed the pole with more vigor than the other dancer's. One woman danced on the pole nearest to us. She was ebony brown. As her set goes on she rearranges her outfit so that her breasts and vaginal area are showing. As the night goes on I see that it is typical for dancers to come out with their tops and vaginal areas covered but then take them off as the song plays, to put them back on and back off again.

My friend tells me that the amateur dancers go earlier in the night and as the night goes on senior dancers come out and do better "tricks" such as climbing the pole. There was a range of music playing; mostly early the latest hits in Hip-Hop and R&B. Artists such as Cardi B, Drake, Future, Rihanna, Nicki Minaj etc. were all played throughout the night. Does the way she dances have anything to do with who is in

the audience and whether or not they will tip her? She does not make eye contact with the audience but at one point comes over to man next to us and gets on top of the table and shakes her butt right in front of him. He does not tip her and after several minutes she moves back to the pole. While I was not expecting her to wow me something about her dancing seemed mechanical and turned me off. She was not dancing to the rhythm of the music.

By this explanation I was looking at her as a female. I didn't feel like she was dancing to the music. She wasn't following the rhythm. It seemed that more women than men tipped the dancers, contrary to who the assumed clientele of a strip club would be. The men were still and did not tip much, but sat relaxed talking with one another and sipping their drinks. My theory on this takes into account my knowledge of the law in Washington, D.C. One is not allowed to touch the dancers and lap dances are not allowed.

Women seemed to be tipping to show support. They said things like, "damn girl, go head!" They would stand around the pole and throw ones on the stage. If someone were far away, they would crumple the bill and throw it on stage. I wanted to give dancers their share of money and people who I came with expressed the same. My friend and I split a five-dollar bill into ones. One can go to the cashier and get ones. We tipped whenever a dancer did a split or climbed the pole and came down fast, or did a combination that interacted with the music. The dancers were not making much money. There were only a few bills on stage. I assumed they were ones and sometimes fives. Every few minutes a man in all black with a push broom who was standing behind the dancers would come and sweep the money his way

and off of the floor. I thought this was in all strip clubs until I went to "Pink Monkey." As the night went on more dancers came out until there were about 15. They wore all kinds of costumes, had different body types and hairstyles though most wore some wig or weave.

The variation of body types was way more than what I had seen in music videos and was considerably below the level of perfection rappers detail in songs. Rappers talk about their love for strip clubs in videos with perfect-looking strippers, when the locations they might go to in real life are quite different. There was way more of a range expressed here; some of them had cellulite and wrinkles. But they all had to dance and make money. Similar to Dj Esco at "Magic City" when the MC calls out a dancer, people refocus their attention on that dancer, however I did not see an influx in tipping or any people getting up to dance. The MC essentially runs the club they're responsible for the energy that dancers can bring to the pole. I was constantly hearing the MC talking to the dancers, encouraging them with "damn, who is that sexy body over there?" and also making fun of them, "What are you doing over there? That ass is too still!" I saw it as encouragement, rather than a negative because some of the dancers would look over to the MC booth, point and laugh or shake their heads and laugh. I also saw it as a way to get audience participation.

Field Work: Getting Interviews with Strippers

My plan was to find interview subjects by going to different strip clubs and dropping off my information. Originally, my plan was to speak with the bartender(s) and ease my way into speaking with the dancers. But after going to Pink Monkey, I

was told I could not return to the strip club. When I inquired as to why, my safety was the reason. If management saw me talking to the dancers they might think I am a government employee or someone trying to expose the strip club for some illegal activity. After expressing my level of comfort ability with such places I still was told that under the departments watch my safety was a concern. Yes, I had read about clubs being shot up, them being run by the mob, and being dirty and run down but I took those as sensational stories. I had been to the same clubs in the same parts of the city that people called dangerous and tell you not to go to. While some parts of town are this way, coming from a community that people speak of this way I say most of it is the stigma and ignorance of the community's function that surrounds communities of color. Later on I was told I could not visit because it was an issue of safety for the dancers. If management saw me talking to them, there was a potential they would face harsh consequences. But the strip club I am looking at does not operate this way. Strippers who had worked at clubs suggested that I speak to dancers directly to get to know them and to get an interview. They told me that each dancer is different, some like to talk.

Field Work Part II: Interview from an unlikely source

I frequent the bar at Fridays on Erie street in downtown Chicago. Two weeks ago I was there and I was pretty down because I still hadn't made any progress with finding interview subjects. After complaining to my sister the bartender, Bobby overheard me and said, "Oh, you're looking for strippers to interview? I know a lot of strippers" My heart started beating faster could Bobby really make this happen? After a week of silence Bobby finally put me in touch with two strippers who work

at “The Factory Gentlemen’s Club,” a strip club that Bobby frequents weekly. Due to scheduling I was only able to interview one of the two dancers and our interview had to take place over the phone, if I’d had more time I would’ve loved to visit the club with my interviewee and interview her within her own space face to face. I interviewed Camilla, a black seasoned dancer at 33 who’s been dancing on and off since she was 18. Below I’ve transcribed our conversation.

1. Why did you start stripping?

“Well I already had a dance background and I was pretty desperate for money at the time. I was on my own at 18 and I had been working at Wendy’s and I couldn’t even pay my phone bill. One of my old coworkers started dancing and convinced me to try it. I hated it at first--mostly because the club was disgusting and you weren’t guaranteed to make money but I saw what other girls were getting and I wanted that so I stayed.”

2. Is the money actually any good?

“People assume that it’s a lot better than it is. ‘It depends a lot on how reasonable the guy – it’s pretty much always a guy – who manages the club you’re working at is. People assume you know that you’re making thousands a night, I mean you can but this isn’t Atlanta or Miami you have your good nights, alright nights and those nights when you go home with \$100.”

3. Do you consider yourself a feminist/why?

“I do now. When I first started dancing I was dating guys often times they assumed that I was a hoe because I strip but we don’t go home with the men that go to the club. When I first started dancing I was really shy and I thought I was dirty for what I did but I realized that we use these men they don’t use us unless we allow them. I come to work, shake my ass and go home. I don’t apologize for the decisions I’ve made with my body.”

4. What annoys you most about your job?

"Day to day, it's actually just bodily function stuff,' 'It's really gross when guys don't wear deodorant and when they come in their pants – that really pisses me off. I always tell guys to let me know if they get too excited, but lots of them either don't listen or care. Judgment from other bitches really pisses me off too"

5. *Are you able to do a 'normal' relationship?*

"The key, I think, is being honest with people from the off. 'Me and my boyfriend have been together for three years and I told him on our first date. He gets it – it's not really anything to do with "normal" sex and I'm up there playing a part, like any dancer on a stage."

"I've taken him to work with me a couple of times so he can see what's going on. I'm not saying he loves it, but the stigma around stripping isn't the same as it once was. If anything, I think a lot of the guys I've been with have been proud of it."

6. *What 'prep' is involved?*

"You have to be really fit to do this job – just have a look at videos on the internet – so keeping your body nice and tight is obviously important. Guys aren't there to see the girl next door – you're fulfilling a fantasy."

7. *When do you make the most money?*

"It depends. Sundays and holidays like Christmas is actually really good. A lot of people might not like that but no one really wants to be alone over Christmas. Most of the time, it's not even about sex."

Part III: Internet Interview

Since I had trouble getting interviews directly with strippers I used an alternative method. The advent of YouTube makes it possible for me to go directly to a database of information in the form of audio and video. This is a luxury not afforded to previous scholars, but it causes some problems. YouTube is a platform that has users with many motives: to promote a service, to give information, to entertain. Some of the material struck me as overwhelmingly supportive of stripping as a profession. Certain videos promote a particular strip club venue.

The videos do not address complications and nuances of dancing naked in a system of patriarchy. They do not address how the system privileges sexual freedom and aggression of men, and how the system condones women's bodies being for the pleasure of men. Thus, in the videos strippers do not have the chance to address how it affects them and women and girls at large. Had I interviewed several strippers directly I guess that some of these issues would have come up. Of course there would have been other issues to watch out for, such as the nature of my thesis being misunderstood to non-academic people and how they would respond because of their own perceptions and guards over their personhood. To the few women that I briefly spoke to I could tell that they were used to guarding their profession due to the stigma which society, though said to be moving more liberal, still attaches to jobs that have to do with sex and pleasure, making it hard for one to progress in the job market and in general to be treated fairly by others.

Below is a table of two videos that I watched several times, transcribed, and which I will use as evidence to support my analysis on stripping. Please refer to this table when reading the next two sections. I will refer to the media as evidence that

stripping at such clubs and participating in the stripping craze is a viable option for income and a possible outlet into other professions. I will touch on how dancing rooted in the African aesthetic is beneficial to strippers, women and girls. I will touch on how strippers and interviewers maintain the patriarchal system by dancing in these places. So as much as dancing is beneficial to the sexuality of women, it combined with the intention of Western civilization to use the black female body for profit and gain makes stripping in strip clubs bad for women.

Title of work	Producer	Interviewer	Featured Dancers	Format	Location
Part 1: Ashley & Sherrella Interview exotic dancers from Stadium Club DC	Super Gorge TV	Ashley & Sherrella	Morgan & Danielle (Ms. Peru and Fat Rabbit)	Video on Location	Stadium Club Washington, DC
Poles Power and Everyday Women	Monique John	Monique John	NuNu	Video On location, compilation, You tube	Magic City Atlanta

1. Morgan and Danielle of Stadium

This first interview I watched looks at two Stadium dancers, Morgan and Danielle. This video is surprisingly all about the dancers experience rather than a promotional video selling an event. They talk more about their jobs as strippers, what they do to prepare to go on stage, their relationship with the other women, how men act, and the profession compared to a regular 9-5. Thus the analysis of this video will focus on these aspects rather than pointing out how the video quietly advertises for the strip club.

The segment opens with the host Ashley Silva whose first words are "recently there has become an almost obsession with gentlemen's clubs". Both

dancers are in white t-shirts. Their legs are showing and it looks like they have on bikini bottoms. They are wearing heels. The view cuts away from the scene with the host to a scene of dancers on a pole. The room is lit bright purple tinged with red while the pole is purple. Silva goes on to say, "contrary to what the viewer may think, it's not just men coming to the strip club". The scene returns to the video of one dancer on the pole with her head and hands on the floor her butt up and her legs perpendicular to the pole. The video cuts back to the interview and Silva says she is "with two of the most popular dancers, Morgan and Danielle at the newest gentlemen's club in D.C."

There are four women seated, however the one on the far left is not identified. Her first question is why females come to the strip club? Both Morgan and Danielle say they think women come in for personal reasons because they want to take what they see and use it at home. Does the word stripper offend her? Danielle does more talking than Morgan. She is sitting closest to the host. Danielle says she was put on earth to entertain people with her body and that she would be ridiculous not to dance. She does not want to do anything else; this is the job for her. Danielle goes on to touch on the strategies dancers have for making money. She said that contrary to popular belief many strippers are lying when they say they are in school. It is a tactic used to gain sympathy from patrons so they tip more.

Morgan got into stripping after getting a divorce and losing her businesses. She used to be a registered nurse. It's hard to work five days a week, to not take vacation when you want to. In one night she can make what people make in a month. For these reasons she would not go back to nursing. The most Danielle has

made in one night at Stadium is \$3400; tax-free she adds and laughs. Morgan did not want to say the most she has made. So the potential to make money makes stripping a good option for a woman who is struggling and in need of money. This has been since at least the early 1900s.

The next question is so predictable and a trend with all of the videos. After asking how much they make or what is the most money they have seen in one night Ashley asks what kinds of celebrities come into the strip club associating money with stardom. Danielle mentions Chris Robinson and Nayo. Danielle says, "There is so much star power in one place and so stripping is about how you are as a hustler how you use your mouthpiece, how you carry yourself." She misplaces the power to make money on the dancer and does not critique this system of how money is made.

There are two types of worker/manager relationships in a strip club, one being independent contractor status. Someone on the site reddit.com who self describes as "a manager of an average sized club with about 40 girls" (assuming he is male, people are asking questions with the assumption that he is male, why?) asks I am a strip club manager, what would you like to know? One user asks "Do you assign them work shifts or supervised them on the job? He responds,

"No girl is an employee, they are all independent contractors. Be here before 7 and there is no fee to work, every hour after 7 the fee goes higher and higher and higher. Most girls are required 3 shifts a week except for the "Club Dimes" they pretty much do whatever the fuck they want. Oh, and of course I supervise them. When they do something stupid like try to bring a cigarette on stage, do a lap dance on the floor, leave early etc. etc. I get them back in line. Hurt these girls \$ and they straighten right up. Put them on day shift for a week or take away a weekend and they are angels for at least a week or two. They may run to another club for the weekend but they're uncomfortable and want to come back home."

While the term independent contractor is used to describe the relationship in which workers do not have a set schedule or salary, the term independent contractor is contested amongst stripper labor rights activists who say strippers are still employees. It is illegal to have to pay management in order to work. Many organizations across the country such as the Exotic Dancer's Union in California have worked to have strippers protected under state and federal laws so that they have a set wage and benefits. In a case covered by The New York Times involving Rick's Cabaret International Inc., a company that owns a chain of strip clubs, a judge ruled that dancers are "strippers were hourly workers who deserved at least the minimum wage" due to the "micromanagement" by managers,

In this interview with Danielle and Morgan it is important to highlight that there is a particular way of talking and acting that makes the most money, which depends upon how much the client is willing to tip based on performance. Danielle makes it sound as if some strippers talk and act better than others, when really it's that their way is more conducive with what the clients want and thus they behave in ways conducive with making money. Sherrella asks a question for the first time, "How does dancing affect personal life?" Danielle who is doing most of the talking says stripping is like any other job in that it comes with a description. She says she must keep her hair, nails, and make-up done, and keep her outfits new but more than anything she says, the job requires being single and not having kids. Her response echoes Morgan's who says she is staying single.

Danielle goes on to talk about her reasons for stripping. She says she did it for the family when they were hitting rock bottom. Here there is a big contrast with

what she said before; that she became a stripper because she was born to entertain with her body. Her response at this point is more desperate and says something about the circumstances under which she came to the job. The next segment is on safety. She mentions Player's Club where someone follows the main character home. Morgan mentions that an employee at one point did follow her home. Do you do a routine before going on stage? Their moods when they go on stage. Morgan gets nervous. Danielle interrupts with that she loves to wow the crowd. She says she has one, two three; Ashley laughs and says five, shots of Patron so that she can mix and mingle. She moves her head up and down and emphatically says it's ok! It's what the job calls for.

Though one might think so, it is not necessary to belabor the point about the emotion needed to carry out the job because there is already been shown that one must employ positive emotion maybe contrary to how they really feel. I argue that emotional labor, though on a spectrum from low (construction workers, police officers) to high (stewardesses, secretaries, strippers) is required of everyone participating in the neoliberal economy. There are ways of being that are not allowed. The neoliberal economy impacts how the entire society is constructed. The degree to which one must change and endure is especially heightened for African-Americans and other peoples whose everyday culture the neoliberal economy is counter but requires the most work of for the least pay.

On what keeps the customer coming back. "Never give "it" up because "it" is what keeps the guy coming back because his ego is involved. It's power, she says with both hands out. "Let me shit on her so that she gives it up," she says. "The

perception of the exotic dancer is that we're all plastic or they are whores." At Stadium there it is a lot of variety and so there are fantasies to fulfill. The advice Morgan gives is to have something to fall back on, know what you are getting caught up in. "People will give you money for anything."

At the end we learn their names are Ms. Peru and Fat Rabbit as they give their Instagram and Twitter names. And of this I ask what the importance of a stripper name is? I have not heard this touched on in any of the interviews though the names are catchy. The names exude sex; they are alluring, exotic; something that if she were to get popular, her name would illicit images of how she danced on the pole, or how she looked. In the next documentary I watched, Cali is the first strippers to be interviewed. It is a simple name, but her style definitely matches some attractive cultural and aesthetics of a part of California exhibited in hip-hop music.

Poles, Power, and the everyday woman with NuNu of Magic City

NuNu was a former ballet student. She describes stripping as a crazy experience because women's bodies look totally different. She thought that "we basically all have the same thing, but we do not." She goes on to describe the ups and downs of being a dancer. They do not make all of this money and everything is great. She invests in hair, eyelashes, costumes, shoes, make-up to come back to work and look good. If she makes \$500, she invests about half. "I just choose to get naked and make some money," but she is like everyone else. There is a scene of three women on the pole at Magic City. The scene is dark but figures can be seen through blue lights. A popular song by rapper Myyko Montana "Do It" is on while they are

dancing. She continues that she cannot work at a store and look at people and ask can I help you? "I cannot work at Forever 21 and stand there and look at "those people". I choose to ask can I help you. Can I get naked and dance for you?" She laughs. Strippers are good girls that are in school with boyfriends at home she emphasizes, that come there because they have that hustler mentality. The shoot is in the dressing room, white lockers, and mirrors.

She say's "The women got y'all beat, they spend more money than the men". She says I don't know what this epidemic is, but women have been coming into the strip club more than men." What does that say about the strip club on a regular basis? Who is it for? If it is about straight men, what does that mean? "Alotta y'all be tryna come in here tryna a find a sugar daddy or trick, we see y'all, we see y'all." She laughs at her own jokes. "Alotta women are intrigued. "There is a video of rapper Nicki Minaj touching a dancers butt and sliding it down the pole. She has money in her left hand. Other women are standing around her watching. There is another³video of Rihanna putting money on a strippers butt. NuNu says, "I would not think I would have to go up to another woman and tell her the rules, because it's all about respect. I respect you, you respect me."

Dancing is good for Black Women

Dancing in it self without the complexity of money and the neoliberal economy is joyous and beautiful. Welsh says, "The humanizing African aesthetic is conflicted by its inevitable but contrary relationship with the technological Western aesthetic which is linear, finite, and efficient." Following in the big footsteps of

³World Star Hip Hop (WSHH) is a content video blog that specializes in shock value and explicit videos

dancers like Katherine Dunham, Pearl Primus, and Kariamu Welsh, it is important to comment on dancing as a pillar of relationship with the universe from an Afrocentric perspective. In her book *The African Aesthetic, Keeper of the Traditions* Welsh says, "Numerous writers have expounded on the historical and cultural bond between continental and diasporic Africans. It is not based solely on color, but the bond exists because of a common African heritage that dates back to pre-dynastic Egypt (Ancient Khemet). Within the general African aesthetic there will exist a multitude of national, what I call family aesthetics. Family aesthetics are related by specific common characteristics while maintaining individual ethnic aesthetic identities. Thus the Sabaar dance of the Wolof people of Senegal is unquestionably Wolof, at the same time it shares common aesthetic traits with the Chopi people of Mozambique, (Welsh 3)" It is a way of forming confidence and familiarity with ones' body, ones' vessel and means of survival. Going forward it is important to reclaim an art that is black and those roots being grounded in the African dance aesthetic contrary to the sentiment that white communities are more liberated in their expression. My female friends say they like to dance and shake their butts but they do it out of fun and games and they know that really, it is not good, she should not be doing it to certain types of music and in certain places. I have heard this same sentiment from many women, but they should not have to feel this way dancing for it is denying the self of experiencing the total self. For instance, NuNu plans on becoming a yoga instructor and personal trainer. She said that dancing can immediately relieve her stress and that she loves it. Both Welsh and Dunham say that the dancing in the community is a statement of its values and of its condition.

"The emotional life of any community is clearly legible in its art forms and because the dance seeks continuously to capture moments of life in a fusion of time, space, and motion, the dance is at a given moment the most accurate chronicler of culture pattern. The constant interplay of conscious and unconscious finds a perfect instrument in the physical form, the human body that embraces all at once. Alone or in concert man dances his various selves and his emotions and his dance became a communication as clear as though it were written or spoken in a universal language." (Clark 516). For the blacks in America it is important to note that the values and personas of the African American community are shaped in reaction to European perceptions and systems. Welsh say's, "It is not uncommon to see Eurocentric African art," (Welsh 6). I believe this is what has become of stripping. For similar to black music, fashion, jargon, dancing is appropriated by the mainstream media and turned into something that is detrimental for the black community to participate in because it depends on the community being less than conscious. What is important to note is that black women remember the roots from which this dancing comes from. Not only does it come from a place beyond the one in which we the body is beautiful, dancing and celebrating it is beautiful. In academia there needs to be new ways of writing for everyday women in women's studies in ways that don't look down upon women for being sexy, speak for women who use their bodies for profit. From the videos I watch it seems that black women are analytical and have the intention of making good choices given their circumstances. Black women face enough burdens that lead to hypo-sexualization, academia must write in a way that supports her! It is important to teach people as

young women and boys to be conscious while enjoying themselves. It is no mistake that men feel entitled to women's bodies; society supports this idea. How is it that there are men my age fulfilling the traits our mothers taught us to watch out for: the aggression you will experience for dancing that way? Her body is not yours to have/pay for. As long as one can pay for a woman to dance and perform other sexual acts a woman's sexuality is in danger. This is not to say that sexually charged environments cannot be safe and enjoyable for women, it is the money and the rules that make it a problem

Conclusion

From this process many things have become apparent about the urban strip club. By urban strip club I mean clubs such as "Magic City, Stadium, The Factory Gentlemen's Club" and other establishments made popular from being mentioned in rap lyrics, on camera in rap videos, and being frequented by appearances from rappers. The establishments serve a largely black clientele, but are consumed by whoever consumes mainstream rap music, a large part of the globe. One cannot say whether or not black women dancing in the strip club are totally good, or totally bad for the women involved. But the mainstreaming of the strip club via rap music seems to be creating a better environment for the dancers; the clubs are cleaner, better managed, and not as dangerous. The design of the way one must survive requires participation in the money economy. For some time in one's young life stripping is a viable and attractive alternative to the 9-5, minimum wage, no personal time and no vacation lifestyle. However the cross marketing is a new way by which institutions make profit and revenue remains a dirty and deceitful illusion

in which the dancers and the general public does not win. Media conglomerates made the choice to start shooting videos in the strip club so that the general public can enjoy the rich and famous lifestyle depicted in music videos. The music videos, YouTube videos, and WSHH videos all participate in creating the illusion that women are enjoying what they do, and willingly participants in their bodies being on display and manipulated; they smile, laugh and say they love the job. I wish I had the opportunity to interview more women, more managers, and people in the music industry so that this question could be answered with more facts. No matter how oppressive the system may be it is a fact that there is no shortage of women participating for a variety of reasons.

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